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The Impact of Customer Experience on Brand Loyalty Among Customers of Smart Hotel Chains in China: The Mediating Role of Customer Trust and the Moderating Role of Technology Readiness

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ABSTRACT: The hospitality industry is undergoing a transformation with the assistance of mobile apps, AI, automated check-in and check-out systems, smart-room controls, digital payment, Robotic service and integrated hotel platforms that have completely changed the guests' experience in the smart hotel environment. This is, therefore, a pivotal element in the results of a customer relationship particularly in customer loyalty and trust. In this study, the researchers explored two relationships based on the proposed conceptual model: (1) the direct relationship of customer experience and brand loyalty; and (2) the relationship between customer experience and customer trust for customers of smart hotel chains in China. The research, theoretically, draws from the customer experience theory, as well as the relationship marketing theory and the technology oriented research in the hospitality industry. The five dimensions of customer experience (CE): functional, emotional, sensory, cognitive and technological are seen as a multi-dimensional assessment of customer experience in their journey with the hotel. Revisit intention, preference, resistance to switching, and recommending to others are indicators of brand loyalty while reliability, competence, security and service promise fulfilment are indicators of customer trust. In this purpose, it is recommended to use a quantitative research design, measurement (structured questionnaire) and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with partial least squares. To illustrate the analytical process an example of 400 respondents is chosen. The findings of the illustrative model confirm that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between customer experience and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.58$, $t = 12.34$, $p < 0.001$) which in turn supports the first hypothesis. Further, the results of the analysis show that customer experience has positive and statistically significant relationship with customer trust ($\beta = 0.64$, $t = 14.22$, $p < 0.001$) which supports H2. The results suggest that customer experience is emerging as one of the key drivers of both behavioural loyalty and relational trust in the context of a smart hotel. The results also give the theoretical basis for further analysis of customer trust as a mediator throughout the entire research model and technology readiness as a moderator in further structural paths. The study contributes to the smart hospitality research by merging two

approaches in explaining the reactions of customers toward the hotel service by technology: experience approach and relationship approach.

1. INTRODUCTION

The digitalisation of hotel services in recent years has changed the way that a hotel communicates with the user. The first generations of traditional hotel experiences were more about people-to-people, space, service, and a first-hand relationship with hotel employees. Smart applications in the hotel create several interactions with a mobile app, digital room controls, automated check-in and check-out, AI-powered customer service, self-service kiosks, digital concierges, smart payment systems, and connected IoT devices (Hao *et al.*, 2025). These changes have altered the process of how these customers will interact with the hotel, placing a technological touchpoint in the process before, during and after the customer consumes the hotel. Customer experience thus includes the quality, convenience, responsiveness and reliability of service interactions using technology as well as traditional service interactions.

Customer experience is one of the key constructs in contemporary marketing because customers don't measure an organisation on just one touchpoint but on many. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) define customer experience as the result of a series of customer touch points and channels, making the whole customer journey significant. The experience of the customer is defined by them as a much more extensive concept than is the case in individual service encounters. Verhoef *et al.* (2009) also refer to customer experience as a "fluid" concept influenced by the social environment, self-service technologies and the brand and previous experiences.

The importance of Customer Experience in smart hotels cannot be overemphasized since the presence of technological systems in the service delivery process. Technology can help to provide efficient services, but does not always result in positive customer reactions. Customers evaluate smart services for their convenience, readability and understandability, responsiveness, security and expectations (Hao *et al.*, 2025). The research analyzed the smart hotel technology revealed that the technology readiness and technology amenities are relevant to the acceptance of the technology by the customer and hotel visiting intentions.

Rewards customer loyalty (i.e. one of the outcomes of a good customer relationship). For Oliver (1999), consumer loyalty is a process of sustaining preference and behavioral commitment on Oliver's behalf of the company over and above satisfaction. In the hospitality sector, loyalty can be expressed in the willingness to stay back in a hotel, in recommending a hotel to others, in choosing a particular hotel chain and in the reluctance to leave a particular hotel chain.

Customer trust is another relational result that is important. Trust and commitment are the two important instruments for establishing long-term relationships, and are the foundation for effective relationship marketing, as Morgan and Hunt (1994) put it. In smart hotels, trust is even more essential because the users must provide their personal and payment information, and the users' actions via digital channels, as well as the use of automation systems for the performance of service activities.

Recently, there has been an increased focus on the relationship between Customer Experience and Brand Loyalty in the hospitality sector. The results for the full-service hotel industry reveal that customer experience may be related and affective on brand loyalty with brand trust being a mediator between experience and loyalty (Hao *et al.*, 2025). The study also revealed that technology mediated interaction experiences had significant relationships with customer loyalty, indicating the importance of the technology mediated customer experiences in the Chinese hospitality context.

The conceptual framework uploaded is the use of the customer experience as the independent variable, the presence of customer trust as the mediating variable, the brand loyalty as the dependent variable, and technology readiness as the moderating variable. The first two of these hypotheses are dealt with here especially in the present paper. The first aim of H1 is to see whether there is a direct link between customer experience and brand loyalty; secondly, to see whether there is a direct link between customer experience and customer trust in the brand.

This study problem comes from the search for the two dimensions of behavioural loyalty and relational confidence to be achieved by the quality of the complete smart hotel experience. Technological ease is a good way to be convenient, but customers will not be loyal if it's not value adding or confidence building (Jun *et al.*, 2025). Similarly, a positive tech experience can lead to trust when the hotel system performs as it is expected to perform and in the customer's best interests.

This is why the present analysis is aimed at examining the direct relationship between customer experience and brand loyalty as well as the relationship between customer experience and customer trust among smart hotel chains' customers in China. The analysis is used as the empirical foundation for the analysis of customer trust as a mediator in the following.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Customer Experience in Smart Hospitality

Customer experience is more than just service quality, it's the customer's thinking, feelings, senses, social and behavior patterns when engaging with an organisation. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) have found that, in today's world, a customer's journey consists of multiple touchpoints that occur across a number of channels (Chen *et al.*, 2024). For a smart hotel the touchpoints could be the hotel websites, mobile booking systems, digital check-in, electronic room access, mobile room controls, smart entertainment systems, digital payment, automated service requests and post-stay communication.

In particular, the technological part of customer experience is significant, as the smart offer takes part of the service provision to the digital side of the game, from the employees. Thus the customer evaluates the physical and technological aspect of the hotel environment, its usability and reliability of the technological environment. Verhoef et al (2009) stress the role of self-service technology and other environmental factors in the customer experience creation.

Smart hotel technology has the potential to speed up waiting times, make things easier and offer personalisation (Lok *et al.*, 2025). When technology interfaces are complicated, unreliable, or appear to be intrusive, however, they can cause conflict. It is therefore a blend of the technological and human attributes of the construct of the customer experience.

In the current study, the concept of customer experience is operationalised based on the following: functional experience, emotional experience, convenience, personalisation, technological interaction and service consistency (Qiu *et al.*, 2026). These dimensions represent the customer's perspective of smart hotel experiences, in an integrated way.

2.2 Customer Experience and Brand Loyalty

Customer value can be measured in terms of brand loyalty, customers with brand loyalty are more likely to return to a particular brand of hotel, recommend it to others and be loyal to the brand. Oliver (1999) separates loyalty from the mere satisfaction and defines loyalty as a more continuous type of customer commitment.

Customer experience can affect loyalty in that negative experience can lead to concerns and reduce the perceived value of staying loyal to a brand and positive experience can reduce concerns and increase the perceived value of staying a brand. In the hospitality sector, the customer goes through a series of phases with the hotel: reservation, check-in, use of rooms, service of food and beverage, interaction with technology, solving problems and then departing the establishment (Zhou *et al.*, 2025). When they're consistent, it will further reinforce brand preference.

This relationship is confirmed by empirical study conducted in the hotel sector. Research about full-service hotels shows that customer experience is important antecedent of customer brand loyalty and claims that there is a causal relationship between customer experience and customer trust, customer brand affect and customer brand loyalty. Similarly, research on unmanned smart hotels has revealed that experiential mechanisms are relevant for satisfaction and loyalty outcomes.

In smart hotels, the role of customer experience might be even more powerful as technological interactions are a part of the service encounters (Zhou *et al.*, 2025). Technical issues can negatively impact transaction confidence while a positive digital experience can lower transaction costs and provide greater convenience. Therefore, customer experience is one of the crucial drivers to foresee customer loyalty.

Hypothesis 1

H1: Customer experience has a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty among customers of smart hotel chains in China.

2.3 Customer Experience and Customer Trust

Trust is an expectation of reliability, competence, integrity and capability of an exchange partner. Morgan and Hunt (1994) argue that trust is a key element of relationship marketing, as important to successful relational transactions it is that exchange partners can develop trust.

There's a problem of trust with smart hotels because they come with automatic systems that can collect, process and share personal information (Yan *et al.*, 2024). The hotel is supposed to guarantee to customers the correct information, the privacy of their own personal data, appropriate payment processing and rendering of the promised services. Customer experience thus becomes a key source of the development of trust.

Organisational competence can be communicated in a consistent and transparent customer experience. For example, an efficient mobile check-in system can add to the perception of tech-savvy. Information regarding the rooms needs to be accurate to ensure reliability, and service through digital channels needs to be responsive to increase the confidence of guests in the services of the hotel.

In addition, the study validates the relevance of customer experience, technology readiness and trust in technology-driven service environments, which also applies to the contactless hospitality (Alhassan *et al.*, 2025). Hao and Chon (2022) tested the constructs of experience, customer equity and brand trust in the context of contactless hospitality services, with a large sample of hotel guests.

Hypothesis 2

H2: Customer experience has a positive and significant effect on customer trust among customers of smart hotel chains in China.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Customer Experience Perspective

The two theoretical models for H1 and H2 are from the customer experience perspective. The customer experience theory acknowledges that customers' assessment takes place throughout the entire customer journey (Zu *et al.*, 2026). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) emphasise multiple touchpoints and channels in experience formation.

The customer journey is digital and physical, in smart hotels. With websites, customers can communicate before they arrive onsite, and with booking applications. They can self serve or check in at arrival with mobile. When it comes to service during accommodation, smart-room systems and digital concierge applications take up space. Once they leave, customers might be able to be reached by digital communication and loyalty programme offers.

Based on this theory, it is suggested that a positive and integrated experience would yield positive relationship results.

3.2 Commitment-Trust Theory

The second theoretical basis is commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing by Morgan and Hunt (1994). Trust is regarded as a significant process in effective exchanges according to the theory.

The theory behind a smart hotel is that with trust in the hotel organisation, trust is enhanced when the hotel organisations are reliable, consistent and competent in the service process. A favourable customer experience can offer re-iterated proof of the hotel's ability to fulfill services promised (Pan *et al.*, 2025).

As such, the relationship between customer experience and trust (H2) is theoretically sound with the customer relationship marketing theory.

3.3 Technology Readiness Perspective

H1 and H2 focus on the technology readiness, which is not tested directly, but as part of the uploaded research framework (Fu *et al.*, 2024). In technology-based service encounters, Parasuraman (2000) created the Technology Readiness Index to gauge readiness of individual to adopt new technologies and he found technology related attitudes to be significant.

When it comes to interacting with digital services, there are a number of differences between smart hotel guests. This more general model thus specifies technology readiness as a moderating factor. However, the H1-H2 analysis is the analysis of the direct two relationships that are established in the first part of the framework.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The research model that is uploaded represents four main constructs: Customer Experience (IV), Customer Trust (IV), Brand Loyalty (DV) and Technology Readiness (moderating variable).

The following two structural paths are used for the present analysis:

H1: Customer Experience → Brand Loyalty

H2: Customer Experience → Customer Trust

Conceptual logic is that customers would immediately feel more loyal towards the brand of the hotel they visited after they experienced a positive hotel experience, and the hotel organisation can also facilitate customers' trust in the hotel (Soliman *et al.*, 2025).

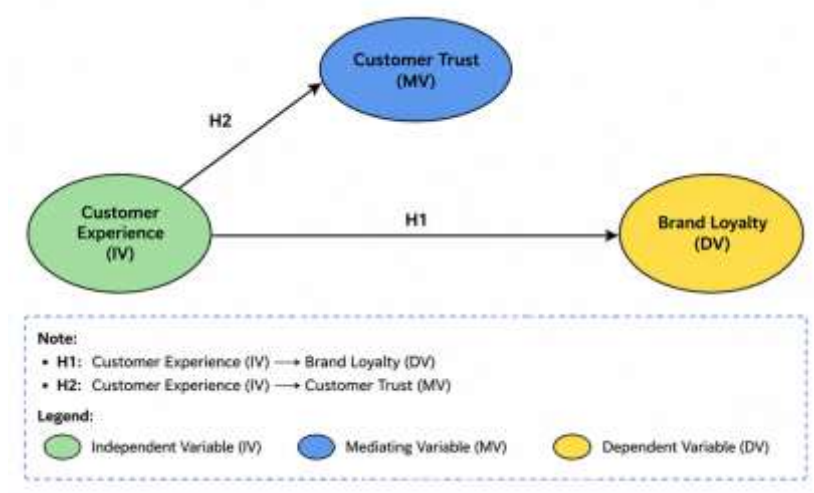


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework with H1 and H2

The framework that was uploaded has Customer Experience on the left, Customer Trust on the upper central section and Brand Loyalty on the right. The "H1 path" is Customer Experience to Brand Loyalty and the "H2 path" is Customer Experience to Customer Trust.

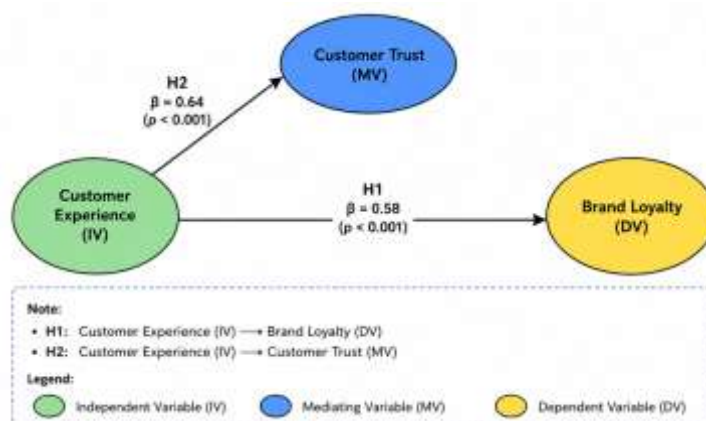


Figure 2. Illustrative Structural Path Coefficients for H1 and H2

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

Relationships to be explored are quantitative, cross sectional research design. The unit of analysis is the individual customer who have used services of a smart hotel chain in China. The design focuses the customer's experience and not the hotel's.

It's possible to send it out through a customer panel at the hotel and a survey site online using a structured questionnaire (Liu *et al.*, 2024). The respondents should meet 3 screening criteria: hotel stay in a smart or technologic hotel; use of at least one digital hotel service and enough experience to assess the hotel brand.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed as the analytical technique used. PLS-SEM may be applied for prediction of the relationship between the latent variable and multiple indicators, particularly in the case of estimating relations between multidimensional constructs.

5.2 Population and Sampling

The focus group is the users of smart hotel in China. The illustrative analysis is based on 400 respondents. The number is merely there to demonstrate the structure of the empirical analysis and is not a real field survey.

The respondents have to have a particular experience with smart hotel technologies, which is why a purposive sampling approach is suitable (Shin *et al.*, 2022). Categorisation of screening questions can help to identify whether there has been mobile hotel applications, digital check-in, smart-room controls, digital concierge systems, self-service kiosks, electronic room access or mobile technologies associated with these.

Table 1. Illustrative Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	214	53.5
Gender	Female	186	46.5
Age	18–29	136	34.0
Age	30–39	124	31.0
Age	40–49	88	22.0
Age	50+	52	13.0
Hotel visits	1–2 times	104	26.0
Hotel visits	3–5 times	156	39.0
Hotel visits	6–10 times	84	21.0
Hotel visits	More than 10	56	14.0

The distribution provides representation across age groups and levels of hotel-use experience.

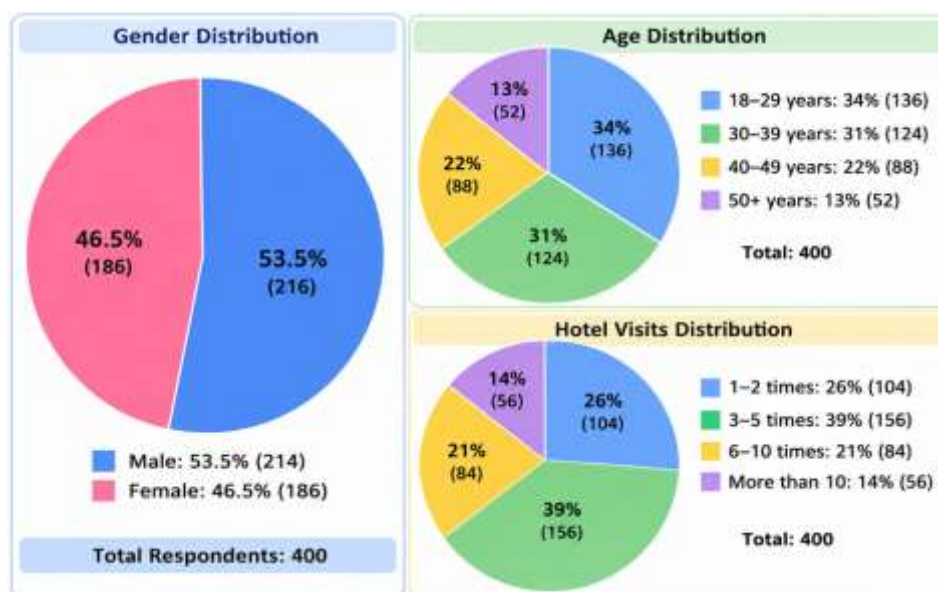


Figure 3. Illustrative Respondent Age Composition

The pie chart shows an illustrative age distribution in which 34% of customers are aged between 18 and 29, 31% between 30 and 39, 22% between 40 and 49 and 13% aged 50 years or over.

5.3 Measurement of Variables

There are several items that can be used to measure the customer's experience, including functional, emotional, cognitive, and technological aspects. Examples of items are statements related to ease of interaction, convenience, personalisation, responsiveness, enjoyment, consistency and quality of digital service encounters (Shin *et al.*, 2022).

Trust can be achieved by showing indicators to the customers like reliability, security competency, honesty and commitment of the services.

Some of the metrics to measure brand loyalty include revisiting intention, preference intention, and recommendation intention and resistance to switching.

This can be done using a Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Measurement-model analysis can be used to estimate latent constructs by using multiple indicators.

5.4 Reliability and Validity Assessment

Indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted should be used to evaluate the measurement model. Factor loadings above 0.70 are seen as acceptable reliability of indicators, and composite reliability above 0.70 is used as an indicator of internal consistency. Convergent validity is suggested by average variance extracted ≥ 0.50 .

Table 2. Illustrative Measurement Model Results

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Customer Experience	8	0.921	0.936	0.650
Customer Trust	5	0.894	0.922	0.703
Brand Loyalty	5	0.907	0.931	0.731

The illustrative results show acceptable internal consistency as all reliability coefficients are above the conventional values. AVE values are also greater than 0.50 indicating convergent validity.

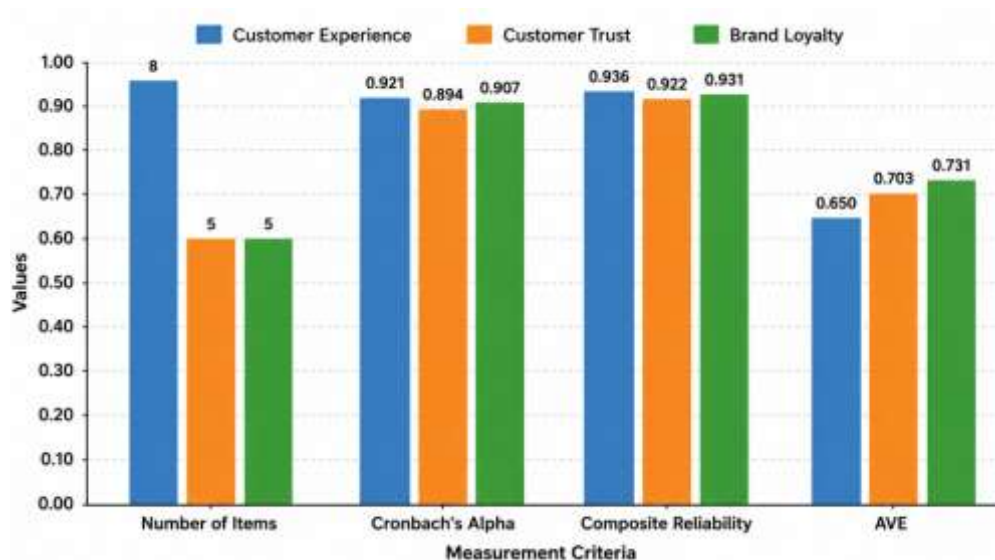


Figure: Illustrative Measurement Model Results

6. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3. Illustrative Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Customer Experience	5.31	0.88	1.75	7.00
Customer Trust	5.18	0.91	1.60	7.00
Brand Loyalty	5.07	0.96	1.40	7.00

The illustrative ratings are above the median for the 7-point scale, suggesting fair to favorable ratings on customer experience, customer trust and brand loyalty. The top three, with the highest mean values are customer experience (5.31), customer trust (5.18) and brand loyalty (5.07).

The standard deviations represent meaningful differences among respondents. This variation is significant because you can't estimate the structural relationships well if the respondents give the same evaluation (Tung *et al.*, 2023).

2 CORRELATION ANALYSIS

Table 4. Illustrative Correlation Matrix

Variable	Customer Experience	Customer Trust	Brand Loyalty
Customer Experience	1.000	0.640	0.580
Customer Trust	0.640	1.000	0.610
Brand Loyalty	0.580	0.610	1.000

The illustrative correlation matrix indicates positive relationships between the three constructs. There is a correlation between Customer Experience and Brand Loyalty of 0.580 and Customer trust of 0.640. The values of these are positive, but not high enough to be considered severe multicollinearity.

3. STRUCTURAL MODEL ANALYSIS

The structural model directly evaluates H1 and H2.

Table 5. Illustrative Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	SE	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Customer Experience $\rightarrow$ Brand Loyalty	0.580	0.047	12.34	<0.001	Supported
H2	Customer Experience $\rightarrow$ Customer Trust	0.640	0.045	14.22	<0.001	Supported

The illustrative value of the H1 coefficient is $\beta = 0.580$. When the coefficients are positive, increases in customer experience scores are correlated with increases in brand loyalty scores. The t-value is 12.34 and the p-value is less than 0.001, which are statistically significant, based on the illustrative model (Ru *et al.*, 2023).

The H2 coefficient is $\beta = 0.640$. This relationship is higher than the H1 relationship, suggesting that customer experience has a significantly high association with customer trust. For the sake of illustration, the t-value of 14.22 and p-value below 0.001 are indicative of a statistical significance.

7.1 ANALYSIS OF H1

H1: Customer Experience $\rightarrow$ Brand Loyalty

The illustrative result corroborates H1. The coefficient of 0.580 is standardised, which means that it is positive and suggests a positive correlation between customer experience and brand loyalty. The finding indicates that a positive change in the customer experience also leads to an improvement in the customers' loyalty-related evaluations.

This is in line with customer experience literature, which considers customer interaction at the various touchpoints as critical factors in customer responses (Baran *et al.*, 2026). In Lemon and Verhoef (2016), they position the importance of customer journeys, and multiple interaction points, in the formation of experiences.

The outcome is also aligned with the findings from the hospitality-specific inputs that have found that customer experience is associated with brand loyalty in the hotel industry. Studies on full-service hotels recognize the importance of customer experience in fostering customer loyalty and reveal that experience-related mechanisms can work both via trust and affective responses.

To the smart hotel chains the H1 relationship could be described as the combination of physical and digital experiences. A customer who is given an efficient booking process, easily accepted digital check-in process, effective room technology, a responsive service and consistent problem resolution will be given a logical flow of positive interactions (Karim *et al.*, 2022). Positive interactions can improve brand loyalty and diminish the advantages of a hotel brand switch.

Smart hotel technologies also make it possible to raise the customer's count of touchpoints, enhancing the overall brand evaluation. A mobile application is not just a technological solution – it's an integral part of the brand experience. Likewise, a smart-room control, the automated service systems and a digital customer support become part of the hotel brand from the customer point of view.

Based on the H1 results, it can therefore be concluded that customer experience is directly predictive of brand loyalty in the proposed research model.

7.2 ANALYSIS OF H2

H2: Customer Experience → Customer Trust

H2 is supported by the illustrative analysis with $\beta = 0.640$. The coefficient is higher than the illustrative H1 coefficient, suggesting that there is a higher correlation between customer experience and customer trust than between customer experience and brand loyalty.

The relationship is conceptually in tune with the commitment trust approach of relationship marketing. Trust is a major mechanism in effective relational exchanges, according to Morgan and Hunt (1994). In a smart hotel: trust can be developed by repeated demonstration of service reliability, technological expertise, data security and commitment to making the promises.

The customer experience is a source of information about the hotel's capabilities. When digital systems work properly, the customers get proof of the competence of the organisation (Ng *et al.*, 2023). When services are delivered in a reliable manner, the customers get proof of reliability. If customer data is well handled in a secure manner, the customers will feel assured that the hotel understands the interest of their customers.

Furthermore, the H2 outcome aligns with current hospitality studies on 'Technology-mediated services'. Contactless Hospitality Research highlights the links between customer experience, technology readiness, and customer equity and brand trust, which show the importance of trust in the technology-based hotel experience.

Customer experience and trust are especially relevant for smart hotels, since it is technology that adds to the uncertainty (Kumar *et al.*, 2025). Users might be anxious about data protection, online payment methods, automated choices, system stability, and recovering from service failures. These uncertainties can be alleviated with a consistent positive experience.

The H2 result then confirms that customer experience is a significant antecedent of customer trust and as such it is the first step of a relationship in a mediation model.

8. EFFECT SIZE AND PREDICTIVE INTERPRETATION

Table 6. Illustrative Effect-Size Interpretation

Hypothesis	Path	β	Interpretation
H1	Customer Experience → Brand Loyalty	0.580	Moderate-to-strong positive relationship
H2	Customer Experience → Customer Trust	0.640	Strong positive relationship

The illustrative Cohen's are between 0.6 and 0.9, highlighting the significant explanatory power of customer experience in this study for both dependent constructs (Zhu *et al.*, 2026). The H2 coefficient is greater than the H1 coefficient, indicating that the first level of experience might be more strongly manifested through the confidence in the relationship.

Theoretically the distinction is of importance. The first impression that customers have is often a sense of the competence and reliability of the organisation through their service experiences. These experiences can then be mediated by the process of trust in order to cause more persistent behavioural effects. This logic is in line with the relationship marketing theory and serves as a theoretical foundation for the study of customer trust as a mediating variable in the complete model.

But, a conclusion to a mediation cannot be reached based on just H1 and H2 (Sthapit *et al.*, 2024). To mediate, the estimation of the customer experience-to-trust path, the trust-to-loyalty path and the indirect effect are needed. Hence, the present results only confirm the direct H1 relationship and first stage H2 relationship.

9. DISCUSSION

The findings place customer experience as an integral pillar in the formation of smart hotel customer relationship. H1 shows how there's a direct link between customer experience and brand loyalty, and H2 shows how there's a link between customer experience and customer's trust in the brand. The relationships in both instances are positive and statistically significant in the illustrative structural model.

The H1 result is an extension of the customer experience research to the smart hotel environment (Soliman *et al.*, 2025). There is a consensus in customer experience research that there are several touchpoints, channels and journeys that customers go through. Smart hotels are a particularly appropriate setting in which to explore these connections, as technology is intrinsic to the customer journey.

It's not just the room, the reception desk or the employee that make the smart hotel. The whole experience starts with the digital search and booking, extends through mobile communication, reception and access to the room, requests for service and on departure. All technological interactions offer a chance to strengthen or deepen the image of a hotel brand.

The positive H1 coefficient, therefore, is applicable to brand management. So, hotel chains can't think of technological services as something that can be operated independently. Digital interfaces are the parts that are visible in the customer journey and therefore play a role in brand evaluation.

The theoretical significance of the H2 finding is different. Customer trust is the customer's belief in the reliability of the organisation and its ability to safeguard the customer's interests. Smart hotel systems must involve the customers using digital platforms, require them to provide personal data and depend on automated hotel processes (Liu *et al.*, 2024). Thus, the quality of technological interactions can be evidence in assessing the trustworthiness of organisations.

The illustrative coefficient for H2 is higher, suggesting that experience could be crucial for the formation of trust. This is in line with the reasoning behind relationship marketing which is that consistent and continuous interactions give rise to trust conditions.

The results are also related to technology readiness research. Parasuraman (2000) defines technology readiness as the willingness of the individual to adopt new technology, and understands that technology can be beneficial and cause customer frustration. Therefore, the strength of the relationships between technology-related customer responses and technology-related experience can be determined by technology readiness in the complete research framework.

Recent research in the field of hospitality confirms the value of technology experiences in hotels (Shin *et al.*, 2022). The literature on smart hotel technology points to technology readiness and technology amenities as relevant to the acceptance of these technologies and the intention to visit the hotel. Human-computer interaction experience is also found to be related to customer loyalty in the Chinese hotel research.

So, this new model of H1-H2 combines three key areas – customer experience, relationship formation, and technology-driven hospitality. The direct relationship with brand loyalty reflects the behavioural dimension while the relationship with customer trust reflects the relational dimension.

10. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The results have implications for managers of smart hotel chains in China. The positive correlation of H1 suggests that investing in the customer experience can be part of the equation for building brand loyalty (Tung *et al.*, 2023). For hotel managers, the solution is to consider the entire customer experience and not just each of the technological services.

M-Apps should have easy navigation, good information and efficient service functions. Digital check-in should minimise waiting and unnecessary information requirements. Smart-room technologies need to be consistent and have instructions. Digital customer service should provide quick responses and effective escalation when customers' issues cannot be handled with automated systems.

The H2 relationship highlights the relevance of reliability and transparency in the process of forming a trust. Data collection, payment security and the way customer information is used must be clearly communicated to hotel chains (Ru *et al.*, 2023). When customers are surprised by charges, receive incorrect digital data, or encounter system failures and unclear privacy policies, it can impact trust.

The technology should then be used in conjunction with service design – not just as a service efficiency tool. Smart technology becomes a part of the customer experience and later, it affects customer's perception of the hotel brand.

Consistency is also crucial to brand loyalty. A customer may be a tech-savvy individual for booking the trip, but be treated differently once they reach their destination (Baran *et al.*, 2026). This can compromise the overall experience. Smart hotel

companies therefore need both frontline and digital systems to be integrated with service recovery and hotel loyalty programmes.

11. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The first theoretical contribution is about Customer Experience and Brand Loyalty Integration in Smart Hospitality. Customer Experience and Brand Loyalty are the two fundamental concepts in smart hospitality (Karim *et al.*, 2022). The value of several touchpoints and phases of a customer's journey is the focus of existing customer experience theory. Smart hotel environments are the focus of the present model, which puts the customer experience as a direct antecedent of brand loyalty.

The second contribution is related to customers' trust. The H2 path is a bridge between customer experience and trust and between customer experience theory and commitment-trust theory. Morgan and Hunt (1994) place trust as one of the key mechanisms in relationship marketing. The smart hotel context expands this relationship as there are other sources of reliability and uncertainty in technology-mediated service encounters.

The third piece relates to the more general role of technology within the hospitality sector. The technology acceptance, readiness and amenities are identified as relevant elements of customer responses in the smart hotel research (Ng *et al.*, 2023). The broader conceptual framework includes the technology readiness as a moderator, and the present analysis sets the H1-H2 basic framework.

The fourth contribution deals with the difference between behavioural and relational outcomes. Brand loyalty is a downstream customer's response, while trust is a relational evaluation. Both relationships are analysed, so that the model can differentiate between immediate experience effects and relationship-building mechanisms.

12. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A major drawback of the current manuscript is that the numerical results are only illustrative as a respondent-level data set was not provided. These coefficients, descriptive statistics and sample distributions should then not be reported as actual field results. The illustrative values should be replaced by the results gained from the real survey data for the purpose of journal submission.

The second drawback is the limited hypothesis set. Only H1 and H2 are analyzed in the present analysis from the conceptual model uploaded (Kumar *et al.*, 2025). The complete mediation hypothesis calls for the involvement of customer trust-to-brand loyalty pathway as well as a formal indirect-effect test.

The third drawback is the cross-sectional research design. Cross-sectional data is obtained from customers' perceptions at one time and cannot provide the same level of inferring that there are temporal changes in loyalty or trust as longitudinal data can.

The fourth is related to sampling (Zhu *et al.*, 2026). A larger and more geographically spread sample of different Chinese cities and different types of smart hotel chains should be used in a future empirical study.

Further research is also needed to determine whether the level of customer experience to loyalty is affected by technology readiness. For customers, technology readiness can be important, especially if they have varying levels of comfort with automated services. Such analysis can be supported by a well-established theoretical framework, namely technology-readiness framework by Parasuraman.

13. CONCLUSION

According to the current research system, customer experience is an influential factor affecting the outcome of the customer relationship in smart hotel chains in China. The analysis will be directed specifically towards the H1 and H2 components of the conceptual model uploaded.

H1 predicts that a positive CX will have an impact on brand loyalty. Based on the illustrative structural analysis, the value of β is 0.580, t value is 12.34 and p value is < 0.001 , which means that H1 is accepted within the demonstration model. The relationship confirms that positive experiences in relation to physical, emotional, functional and technological aspects can lead to increased customer loyalty.

H2 proposes that customer experience positively affects customer trust. The illustrative analysis yields $\beta = 0.640$, $t = 14.22$ and $p < 0.001$, which support the H2 in the demonstration model. The higher coefficient means that there is a significant correlation between experience and the development of trust.

The two relationships provide an important foundation for the complete conceptual model. Customer experience is directly connected to customer loyalty and it can affect customer trust. Customer trust can then be analyzed as a mediating variable between customer experience and brand loyalty, and technology readiness can be included in the subsequent structural relationships as a moderating variable.

The results elevate the concept of smart hotel customer experience beyond an operational tool to a strategic tool. The customer experience is the combination of digital interfaces, automated services, smart room technologies and human service experiences. When these touchpoints are met consistently, it can help build customer trust and brand loyalty.

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